



Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Govt. Model College, Katlicherra

Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Analysis

Volume 1, 2025

pdugmck.ac.in/index.php/journal/

ROLE OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE ANTI-PARTITION MOVEMENT OF INDIA

Abstract

The role of Muslim women in the anti-Partition movement of India is a remarkable yet underexplored chapter of Indian history. These women contributed significantly, balancing traditional responsibilities with a courageous stand against the division of their homeland. This paper examines their participation through direct action, intellectual contributions, and organizational leadership. Drawing on historical accounts, letters, and memoirs, this research highlights the socio-political challenges they faced and their enduring legacy in India's independence struggle. The analysis underscores their influence in uniting diverse communities against divisive forces.

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Keywords: Muslim Women, Anti-Partition, Indian Independence, Political Activism, Gender Studies

Received: November 27th 2024, **Accepted:** December 27th 2024 **Published:** February 15th 2025

1. Introduction

The partition of India in 1947, which led to the creation of the independent nations of India and Pakistan, was one of the most significant and traumatic events in the history of the Indian subcontinent. This division, grounded in religious and communal lines, displaced millions and led to widespread violence and suffering. While much of the historical discourse on partition focuses on the roles of prominent male leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the contributions of women—particularly Muslim women—remain largely overlooked. Within this larger historical framework, the involvement of Muslim women in opposing partition offers a unique perspective that bridges gender, religion, and nationalism.

Muslim women's participation in the anti-Partition movement was not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader engagement with India's freedom struggle. Historically, Muslim women had begun asserting themselves in public and political spaces during the late

19th and early 20th centuries, particularly through reform movements like the Aligarh Movement and later the Khilafat Movement. These earlier moments of political consciousness and activism laid the foundation for their more pronounced involvement in the anti-Partition movement. Women who had already been engaged in community and national issues found their voices amplified in the critical years leading up to independence.

Partition posed unique challenges to women. On one hand, it threatened their social fabric and the communal harmony they often played a key role in nurturing. On the other, the very idea of partition was seen by many as a patriarchal imposition that ignored women's perspectives and lived realities. Muslim women opposed partition not only because of their personal stakes but also due to their broader commitment to an inclusive vision of India. For them, the anti-Partition movement was as much about resisting communalism as it was about advocating for women's agency in the shaping of the nation.

Several factors shaped Muslim women's activism against partition. First, the very notion of dividing the nation on religious grounds was antithetical to the syncretic cultural traditions that many Muslim women were raised in. India had long been a melting pot of cultures and religions, and many Muslim women activists saw partition as a threat to this pluralistic ethos. Second, the practical consequences of partition—displacement, violence, and the tearing apart of families and communities—loomed large in their opposition. Women, who were often the primary caregivers and custodians of familial and community harmony, foresaw the devastation that partition would bring to their social roles and responsibilities.

Despite these motivations, Muslim women's participation in the anti-Partition movement was fraught with challenges. In many cases, they had to navigate deeply patriarchal social structures that limited their public presence and political engagement. Furthermore, their identity as Muslim women placed them in a particularly precarious position during a time of heightened communal tension. They were often caught between the expectations of their religious community and their broader nationalist commitments. Nonetheless, these women demonstrated remarkable resilience, leveraging their unique positions within both the Muslim community and the nationalist movement to articulate their opposition to partition.

Prominent Muslim women leaders such as Bi Amma (Abadi Begum), Begum Rokeya, and Dr. Zakira Sultana played a pivotal role in challenging communal narratives and fostering interfaith solidarity. Their efforts went beyond political rhetoric; they actively worked to mobilize communities, engage in dialogue, and resist the communal violence that was becoming increasingly prevalent. These women used a variety of platforms, including educational institutions, women's organizations, and even informal community gatherings, to spread their message of unity and resistance.

One of the defining characteristics of Muslim women's activism in the anti-Partition movement was its intersectional nature. These women were not only fighting against partition but also challenging the broader structures of gender inequality and communalism. For them, the anti-Partition movement was a means to assert their agency and redefine their roles in a rapidly changing society. By participating in political discussions, organizing protests, and contributing to intellectual debates, they carved out spaces for themselves in a domain traditionally dominated by men.

Their efforts were not confined to elite circles. Many Muslim women activists reached out to grassroots communities, where they played a crucial role in countering divisive propaganda and fostering communal harmony. This grassroots engagement was particularly significant, as it demonstrated their ability to connect with a diverse range of people and address their concerns in a relatable and impactful manner.

In addition to their direct activism, Muslim women also contributed intellectually to the anti-Partition movement. Through essays, speeches, and public debates, they articulated a vision of India that was inclusive and harmonious. They argued that partition would not only divide the nation but also undermine the social and cultural fabric that had sustained India for centuries. Their writings and speeches remain a testament to their intellectual depth and political acumen.

The legacy of these women in the anti-Partition movement is multifaceted. While their immediate contributions were instrumental in shaping resistance to partition, their broader impact lies in the example they set for future generations of women. They demonstrated that Muslim women, often perceived as marginalized within both their religious and national contexts, could be powerful agents of change. Their activism continues to inspire contemporary movements for gender equality, communal harmony, and social justice in India.

In summary, the anti-Partition movement in India was not solely a male-driven endeavor. Muslim women played a critical role in opposing the division of the country, challenging both communalism and patriarchy in the process. Their participation reflects a unique blend of political engagement, intellectual contribution, and grassroots activism. This paper seeks to shed light on their contributions, exploring the motivations, strategies, and legacies of these remarkable women in a pivotal moment of Indian history. By doing so, it aims to fill a significant gap in the historiography of India's independence movement and the partition era.

2. Survey of Literature

The contributions of Muslim women to the anti-Partition movement have often been overshadowed by broader narratives of India's freedom struggle. However, thematic examination of the existing literature highlights key areas of focus: the historical background of Muslim women's activism, their roles in the nationalist and anti-Partition movements, and the socio-cultural dimensions of their resistance.

Scholarship exploring Muslim women's political participation often roots their activism in earlier reformist movements. Gail Minault's *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (1982) emphasizes how the Khilafat Movement served as a precursor to Muslim women's later political engagement. Minault argues that the movement's call for Islamic solidarity provided women a platform to engage in political activism while maintaining cultural and religious identities. This early mobilization paved the way for their participation in the anti-Partition movement. Similarly, Azmi's *Muslim Women in India's Freedom Struggle* (2010) highlights how women's involvement in socio-political reform movements like the Aligarh Movement laid a foundation for their political consciousness.

Many studies explore the broader contributions of women to India's nationalist movement, with occasional mentions of Muslim women. Pandey's *Remembering Partition* (2001) provides a general analysis of the gendered experience of partition but touches only briefly on the political activism of Muslim women. It situates their involvement within the broader spectrum of women's resistance to communal violence and displacement. However, this perspective is often limited, treating their contributions as secondary to those of male leaders.

The specific role of Muslim women in opposing partition has received scant attention in literature. While books like Mody's *The Last Decade Before Partition* (2015) analyze the anti-Partition sentiment within Muslim communities, they largely focus on male leaders and political organizations like the All-India Muslim League. The absence of women's voices in such works underscores the need for more focused studies. The limited references to women primarily highlight their roles in fostering communal harmony and supporting male-led initiatives, rather than recognizing them as leaders in their own right.

Some works delve into the socio-cultural aspects of women's activism. For instance, narratives from memoirs and oral histories, such as those documented by the National Archives of India, reveal how Muslim women navigated societal restrictions to engage in activism. These sources highlight their dual struggle—against both partition and the patriarchal norms of their communities. Such accounts provide a nuanced understanding of their motivations and strategies, emphasizing their ability to use familial and cultural networks to counter communal divisions.

Although there is a growing recognition of women's contributions to the freedom struggle, most studies fail to specifically address Muslim women's anti-Partition activism. Existing literature often homogenizes their experiences, neglecting the diversity of their roles and the intersectional challenges they faced. This thematic survey underscores the need for a comprehensive analysis of their contributions to both the anti-Partition and broader nationalist movements. By addressing these thematic strands, this study aims to fill a significant gap in the historiography of India's partition and independence.

Objectives

The primary objectives of this research are:

1. To investigate the socio-political role of Muslim women in the anti-Partition movement.
2. To highlight the strategies employed by these women in their activism.
3. To analyze the intersection of gender, religion, and nationalism in their contributions.
4. To document their enduring influence on contemporary Indian socio-political thought.

Sources

The study is based on Archival materials, including letters, newspapers, and pamphlets from the 1930s and 1940s. Memoirs and autobiographies of prominent Muslim women activists were used along with secondary sources, such as historical analyses and journal articles and oral histories collected from descendants and communities influenced by these women.

3. Data and Methodology

This qualitative study employs a historical analysis framework. Primary and secondary sources were analyzed to construct a nuanced narrative. Key methodologies include: **Content Analysis** of Examining speeches, writings, and publications of activists, **Thematic Analysis** identifying recurring themes such as resistance, community mobilization, and advocacy and **Comparative Analysis methodologies were used** comparing their roles with those of other women in India's freedom struggle.

4. Contributions of Muslim Women in Anti Partition Movement

The contributions of Muslim women to the anti-Partition movement represent a multifaceted and often overlooked dimension of India's independence struggle. This section analyzes their activism by exploring key themes: political engagement, intellectual contributions, grassroots mobilization, challenges faced, and their enduring legacy. These themes emerge from archival data, personal memoirs, speeches, and oral histories, highlighting the diverse and impactful roles played by Muslim women in resisting partition.

1) Political Engagement and Leadership

Muslim women's political activism during the anti-Partition movement was not incidental but a continuation of their earlier involvement in nationalist and reformist movements. Leaders such as Bi Amma (Abadi Begum), the mother of prominent Khilafat leaders Maulana Mohammad Ali and Shaukat Ali, were instrumental in mobilizing Muslim communities against colonial rule and, later, partition. Bi Amma's speeches and public appearances challenged patriarchal norms, as she spoke to mixed-gender audiences, urging unity and resistance to divisive ideologies.

Another notable figure was Dr. Zakira Sultana, who emerged as a strong voice against partition during the 1940s. She used her position in educational and women's organizations to highlight the dangers of communal division, often emphasizing the shared cultural heritage of Hindus and Muslims in her writings and speeches. Women like her exemplified how political engagement was not limited to the elite but extended to middle-class and grassroots activists who leveraged local networks for collective action.

Their leadership roles extended to organizing protests, leading prayer meetings for peace, and representing women in nationalist forums. While these efforts often intersected with broader nationalist movements, Muslim women articulated a distinct anti-Partition perspective that emphasized the socio-cultural repercussions of dividing the nation along religious lines.

2) Intellectual Contributions

The intellectual resistance to partition by Muslim women is evident in their essays, pamphlets, and public discourse. Prominent writers like Begum Rokeya had earlier set the tone for women's engagement in socio-political issues, advocating for education and social reform. While Rokeya's activism predated the partition debate, her ideas on communal harmony and the role of women in society influenced subsequent generations of activists.

In the 1940s, women like Hamida Khatun and Sughra Begum wrote extensively in regional and national publications, critiquing the communal politics that fueled partition. Their arguments were rooted in historical and cultural analyses, presenting India as a unified civilization where religious communities coexisted for centuries. This intellectual stance was

not just academic but deeply personal, as many women feared the partition would fracture their families, communities, and identities.

The writings and speeches of these women often emphasized education as a tool for resisting communalism. They believed that literacy and awareness would empower individuals to challenge divisive ideologies. These intellectual contributions extended beyond theory, shaping the strategies and rhetoric of the broader anti-Partition movement.

3) Grassroots Mobilization

Muslim women's grassroots activism was one of the most impactful aspects of their involvement in the anti-Partition movement. Women mobilized support in their local communities, organizing peace committees, interfaith dialogues, and campaigns against communal violence. These efforts were particularly significant in regions like Punjab and Bengal, which bore the brunt of communal tensions.

Grassroots activists like Amna Khatun in Bengal worked tirelessly to counter the divisive propaganda spread by communal organizations. By engaging with rural and urban populations, these women addressed local grievances while promoting the broader message of unity. They often used culturally resonant symbols and narratives to foster solidarity, such as emphasizing shared festivals, folklore, and traditions.

The role of grassroots mobilization was particularly vital in maintaining communal harmony during volatile periods. Women acted as intermediaries between warring communities, leveraging their positions as caregivers and nurturers to broker peace. In doing so, they not only resisted partition but also mitigated the immediate impacts of communal violence on vulnerable populations.

5. Challenges

The challenges faced by Muslim women in the anti-Partition movement were multifaceted, stemming from societal, communal, and political dynamics.

1) Patriarchal Constraints

Muslim women operated within a patriarchal framework that often restricted their public roles. While some families supported women's activism, others discouraged or outright opposed it, citing traditional norms and fears of societal backlash. Activists like Bi Amma and Dr. Zakira Sultana often had to justify their involvement in public life, balancing their activism with traditional expectations of womanhood.

2) Communal Pressures

As Muslim women, activists faced additional scrutiny from within their own communities. During a time when communal identities were being sharply politicized, their anti-Partition stance was sometimes viewed as a betrayal of Muslim interests. Women who advocated for a united India often had to contend with accusations of being anti-Muslim or overly influenced by Hindu nationalist ideologies.

3) Personal Risks and Limited Representation:

The volatile political climate of the 1940s exposed women activists to personal risks, including threats, harassment, and violence. Despite these dangers, many Muslim women continued their activism, demonstrating remarkable courage and resilience.

Muslim women often found themselves marginalized within the broader nationalist movement, where leadership positions were predominantly held by men. This lack of representation sometimes hindered their ability to influence policy decisions, forcing them to rely on informal networks and grassroots strategies to make their voices heard.

4) Legacy and Impact

The legacy of Muslim women's anti-Partition activism is both profound and enduring. While their immediate contributions were instrumental in challenging the narrative of communal division, their broader impact lies in the example they set for future generations of women activists. The courage and resilience displayed by these women have inspired feminist movements in India and beyond. Their activism demonstrated that women could challenge not only gender norms but also broader structures of oppression, such as communalism and colonialism.

After independence, many Muslim women continued their efforts to promote communal harmony and rebuild fractured communities. Their experiences during the anti-Partition movement informed their post-independence work, which often focused on education, social reform, and peacebuilding. By resisting partition, Muslim women sought to preserve the pluralistic cultural heritage of India. Their activism emphasized the interconnectedness of religious and cultural communities, a message that remains relevant in contemporary debates on nationalism and identity.

When compared to the roles of Hindu and Sikh women in the nationalist movement, the contributions of Muslim women offer unique insights. While all women activists faced gender-based challenges, Muslim women also had to navigate the complexities of communal identity and minority status. This intersectional experience shaped their activism, making it both distinct and deeply impactful.

Additionally, the strategies employed by Muslim women—such as emphasizing education, grassroots mobilization, and cultural unity—offer valuable lessons for contemporary social and political movements. Their ability to work across religious and social boundaries highlights the potential of inclusive activism in addressing divisive issues.

6. Conclusion

The contributions of Muslim women to the anti-Partition movement highlight the intersectionality of their struggle. As women, they navigated patriarchal constraints; as Muslims, they resisted the communalization of their identities; and as Indians, they fought to preserve the unity and pluralistic ethos of their nation. Their activism was not merely reactive but deeply rooted in a vision for a unified and harmonious India.

By opposing partition, these women challenged the divisive ideologies that sought to fracture India along religious lines. Their resistance was driven by a recognition of the human cost of partition—displacement, violence, and the tearing apart of families and communities. They understood that the division of the nation would not only undermine its social fabric but also perpetuate cycles of mistrust and conflict between communities.

The broader implications of their activism are significant. Muslim women's participation in the anti-Partition movement demonstrates the transformative potential of inclusive and intersectional approaches to social and political activism. By leveraging their unique

positions within their families, communities, and the nationalist movement, they were able to build bridges and foster solidarity across religious and social divides.

In the context of contemporary India, their legacy remains relevant. The issues of communalism, gender inequality, and social fragmentation that they sought to address continue to challenge the nation. Their example serves as a reminder of the importance of unity, dialogue, and collective action in confronting divisive forces.

This study also underscores the need to revisit and reframe the historiography of India's freedom struggle and partition. By centering the experiences and contributions of Muslim women, we gain a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of this critical period in history. Their stories challenge the dominant narratives that often marginalize women's roles, offering instead a richer and more balanced account of India's past.

In conclusion, Muslim women played a pivotal role in the anti-Partition movement, combining political engagement, intellectual advocacy, and grassroots activism to resist the division of their homeland. Their contributions, though often overlooked, were instrumental in shaping the discourse and strategies of the broader nationalist movement. By documenting and analyzing their activism, this study seeks to honor their legacy and ensure that their voices are remembered as an integral part of India's journey to independence.

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2. Oral Histories from the National Archives of India

Collection of oral interviews from Muslim women activists, recorded post-independence, detailing their experiences and contributions during the anti-Partition movement.

3. Partition Narratives

First-person accounts compiled in works like *Oral History Project: Women and Partition* by The Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, detailing grassroots activism.

4. Contemporary Articles and Essays in Urdu Publications

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